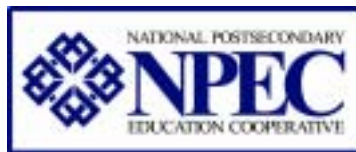# Moving From Theory to Action:
Building a Model of Institutional Action for Student Success

Executive Summary

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MOVING FROM THEORY TO ACTION:
BUILDING A MODEL OF INSTITUTIONAL ACTION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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Executive Summary

Despite decades of research on student retention, especially on the events that influence student attrition, researchers have yet to develop a model of student success that provides institutions and states guidelines for the sorts of actions they would take to increase student success.

This is the case for a number of reasons. First, research on why students leave a postsecondary institution prior to completion does not tell institutions and states what to do to help students stay. Second, research on student attrition and persistence tends to be conceptualized in terms that, while theoretically appealing, are too abstract to be practically useful. For instance while it is conceptually useful to know that involvement matters for student success, that knowledge does not tell institutions how to promote involvement in ways that make it matter for student success. Third, a good deal of research focuses on events outside of college or on student attributes that are not easily amenable to institution action. Finally, there continues to be a good deal of confusion, if not disagreement, about how one should define and in turn measure student success.

The net result is that despite the extensive body of research on student attrition and persistence, we have been unable to translate what we know about student persistence into forms of knowledge that institutions and states can use to direct their actions. This report is a first attempt to develop a model of institutional and state action for student success that provides these guidelines.

To make that translation, we reviewed what past research on student persistence and success tells us about the conditions within colleges and universities that are associated with student success. We did not focus either on student attributes or those forces outside the institution because they are largely beyond institutional influence and also, in the case of student attributes, such an emphasis might lead institutions to accept only those students who they deem more likely to succeed on their own. Such conditions as the institutional climate for students established by the activities of faculty, staff, and administrators, the character and range of support provided to students, the quality and frequency of feedback about student performance, and the activities that engage students as valued members of the institution, are, however, within the capacity of institutions to change. We draw upon studies of effective institutional practices to identify the types of linked actions and policies institutions can adopt to increase the success of their students. In so doing, we argue that, at its core, student success requires that students succeed within classrooms. Thus, the model emphasizes the ways in which institutional actions must first and foremost address student experiences within classrooms and the actions of those who help shape the classroom experience, particularly the faculty.

Given that institutions do not operate in a policy vacuum, we also present a model of the impact of state and federal policies on student success. Based on theoretical and historical understandings of the complex relationship between postsecondary institutions and policy makers at the state and national levels, we present a model of contemporary policy making that links policy considerations,

interest group demands, political contexts, implementation and assessment. We then apply the model to a variety of emerging state and federal initiatives to better understand key policies shaping student preparation, access, resource allocation, performance standards and accountability for student success. Our analysis suggests that contemporary state and national policies have the greatest positive impact upon postsecondary student success when they focus on the following:

- *Creating linked P-16 systems* to align primary and secondary school standards with postsecondary requirements;

- *Creating databases* that can follow students throughout all educational levels;

- Supporting *teacher development* in primary and secondary schools;

- *Providing educational development* for under-prepared students;

- *Creating outreach programs* directed at traditionally underrepresented students;

- *Improving course articulation* between 2- and 4-year institutions;

- *Conducting early and continuous evaluation and assessment* of student preparation for postsecondary access and success; and

- *Establishing innovative finance policies* that increase overall financial support and direct aid to the students with greatest financial need.

We suggest that each student exists in a particular context that shapes his or her probability of succeeding in postsecondary education. A specific context for student success is shaped by a variety of contextual factors including demographics, culture, available resources, and existing policies. These contextual factors are often beyond the institution's direct sphere of influence. When developing policies intended to improve student success, policymakers should also devote attention to shaping these contexts.

To most effectively enhance postsecondary student access, persistence and success, institutional leaders and policymakers should consider linked strategies when crafting policy.

- First, they need to place a high priority on achieving goals and achieving consensus on a strategy for student success policies. The goals should delineate which students the policies intend to serve, how the students will be better served by the proposed policies, and how the policies will affect institutions, other students and stakeholders. Consensus should also be obtained on how the policies should be implemented, who will implement the policies, and what other actors will be affected by the implementation;

- Second, policies designed to enhance student success should address, to the extent possible, the myriad of contextual factors that affect a student's probability of success;

- Third, policies designed to enhance student success should be legitimate. That is, they should be consonant with the prevalent political context and normative understandings of an inclusive set of stakeholders. It should also be possible to implement the proposed policies with the infrastructure and resources at hand; and

- Fourth, any proposed policy should be designed to generate the support of broad coalitions of postsecondary stakeholders across multiple sectors of the educational system including students, families and communities.

We conclude with a series of recommendations concerning the types of research needed to address a number of existing gaps in our knowledge of both institutional and state actions. It is our view that further research is needed on:

- The impact of faculty development programs

- The effect of the increasing tendency of institutions to employ part-time faculty to teach classes, particularly during students' critical first year of college;

- More effective ways of addressing the academic needs of academically under-prepared students, especially those from low-income and underserved backgrounds,

- Effective forms of program implementation that are associated with both program success, and the ability of programs to endure over time at the center, rather than the periphery, of institutional life;

- Ways that institutions and states can partner to provide aid to low-income students, particularly during times of budget restraints.

- Student course-taking patterns at 2-year schools, particularly credit and non-credit course-taking patterns, since many adult, low-income, and under-prepared students attend community college prior to entering 4-year institutions; and

- Various aspects of the P-16 approach such as K–12 teacher preparation, alignment of standards, outreach, improved data collection, and quality assessments since unified P-16 approaches to student preparation show great promise for promoting postsecondary student preparation, access, persistence, and success.

Future research aside, it is our view that we already have enough evidence to begin guiding institutional, state and national action on behalf of student success. Though there is still much to learn, we already have a good sense of "what works." The issue, in our view, is not so much a lack of knowledge as it is our failure to build upon and extend partnerships between institutions and policy makers on behalf of the students we serve.